

## 1. Background

Sextus Empiricus (160-210 CE) was an ancient Greek philosopher and physician. His book, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism*. This is named after Pyrrho of Elis, an earlier skeptic (360-270 BCE), who has no (known) publications.

Regarding the question, “Do we have knowledge?” there are three positions:

- *Dogmatists* claim that we do have knowledge.
- *Academics* claim that we do not have knowledge. (Typically called “academic skeptics.”)
- *Skeptics* claim that we should continue to investigate whether we have knowledge (we don’t know whether dogmatists or academics are correct.) (Sometimes called “Pyrrhonian skeptics.”)

*What is Skepticism?* “Skepticism is an ability to set out oppositions among things which appear and are thought of in any way at all, an ability which, because of the equipollence in the opposed objects and accounts, we come first to suspension of judgment and afterwards to tranquility.” [Book I, iv]

- *Paraphrasing*: for all statements  $p$ , skeptics show that there are equally convincing and conflicting accounts about whether or not we know that  $p$ , such that we should be agnostic about such matters. Doing so will make us spiritually tranquil.

### 1.1. *Belief and appearances*

Skeptics do not believe anything, where belief means “posit[ing] as real the things you are said to hold beliefs about.”

However, skeptics do make “utterances” that are “belief-like,” in that these utterances “say what is apparent to [the Skeptic] and report their own feelings without holding opinions, affirming nothing about external objects.”

Skeptics accept statements such as “It appears to us that honey is sweet.” They withhold judgment about statements that go beyond the appearances, e.g. “Honey [actually] is sweet.”

This is because “appearances depend on passive and unwilling feelings, and are not objects of investigation.”

Nevertheless, at times, skeptics challenge the authority of appearances, largely to show that even in the safest corner of our knowledge, we must avoid dogmatism.

### 1.2. *The standard of skepticism*

Standards of action: live in accordance with “everyday observances,” which include:

- Guidance by nature: our natural inclinations to perceive and think
- Necessitation of feelings: hunger and thirst
- Customs and laws: essentially commonsense ways of life
- Expertise

However, these are standards of action, not rules of belief. You can be guided all of these things and not form a belief about their deeper underlying, realities.

### 1.3. *What is the aim of skepticism?*

*In a nutshell*: “Tranquility of opinion.”

By recognizing that there are equally good reasons to both affirm and deny any proposition, they do not become overly attached to any belief or doctrine. While skeptics will inevitably feel things over which they have no control, they will recognize that this is something about them, and not about the world, which helps to calm the mind.

## 2. The Five Modes (Book I, xv)

How does suspension of judgment come about? “Modes” are essentially strategies for showing how there are always “equipollent” positions for any purported item of knowledge.

### 2.1. *The Mode of Dispute*

D1. Equally good arguments for and against  $p$  exist. (“undecidable dissension” §164)

D2. If equally good arguments for and against  $p$  exist, then we should suspend judgment about  $p$ .

D3.∴ We should suspend judgment about  $p$ . (From D1, D2)

## 2.2. *The Mode of Relativity* [Book I, xiv]

*General idea:* If all appearances are relative to putative knowers and putative objects of knowledge, then we cannot trust that our appearances say anything about the deeper nature of these objects.

### 2.2.1. *'Perspectival' arguments*

- P1. The only way to ascertain which appearances are the objectively correct ones is by appeal to other appearances. [e.g., §59]  
 P2. Subjects who differ anatomically, perceptually, environmentally, or culturally will not experience the same appearances. [Covers modes #1-4, 10 in Book I, xiv]  
 P3. There are subjects who differ anatomically, perceptually, environmentally, or culturally.  
 P4. ∴ There is no way to ascertain which appearances are the objectively correct ones. (P1-P3)

### 2.2.2. *'Objective' arguments*

- P1. The only way to ascertain which appearances are the objectively correct ones is by appeal to other appearances.  
 O1. Objects appear differently according to their admixtures, composition, quantity, frequency, and position. [Covers modes #5,6,7,9 in Book I, xiv]  
 O2. ???

- P4. ∴ There is no way to ascertain which appearances are the objectively correct ones. (S1, O1, O2?)

## 2.3. *Agrippa's Trilemma (Infinite Regress, Hypothesis, Reciprocity)*

### 2.3.1. *No Free Lunch Principle*

If  $q$  is  $S$ 's justification for believing that  $p$ , then  $S$  must be justified in believing that  $q$ .

### 2.3.2. *The Setup*

Suppose that you claim to know that  $p$  (e.g. that frogs are green.)

How do you know that  $p$ ?

Because  $q$  (e.g. you've seen frogs in good lighting conditions and they appear green)

But how do you know that  $q$ ?

Because  $r$ ...

How does this end? Three options:

- It doesn't end (infinite regress).
- $r$  is justified by  $p$  or by  $q$  (circular reasoning, "reciprocity")
- $r$  is unjustified (arbitrary assumption, "hypothesis")

None seem like plausible justifications.

### 2.3.3. *The Argument*

- A1. For all  $S$ ,  $p$ , and  $q$ , if  $q$  is  $S$ 's justification for believing that  $p$ , then  $S$  must be justified in believing that  $q$ .  
 A2. If A1 is true, then all justification results in an infinite regress, a vicious circle, or stopping at an arbitrary assumption.  
 A3. We cannot possess an infinite chain of justification.  
 A4. Viciously circular reasoning does not provide justification.  
 A5. Stopping at an arbitrary assumption does not provide justification.  
 A6. ∴ No belief is justified. (A1-A5)